Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts

Volume 47
Issue 3 *January/February 2007*

Article 5

1-1-2007

# Direct Instruction with Playful Skill Extensions: Action Research in Emergent Literacy Development

Jean M. Keaton
*Kindergarten Teacher, Tallahassee, Florida*

Barbara C. Palmer
*Florida State University*

Karen R. Nicholas
*Florida State University*

Vickie E. Lake
*Florida State University*

# Direct Instruction with Playful Skill Extensions: Action Research in Emergent Literacy Development

**Jean M. Keaton**
**Kindergarten Teacher, Tallahassee, Florida**

**Barbara C. Palmer**
**Karen R. Nicholas**
**Vickie E. Lake**
**Florida State University**

*Direct instruction teaching methods have been found to promote the acquisition of literacy in developing readers. Equally important, learning strategies that allow children to construct knowledge through active participation increase their motivation for reading and writing. This action research was designed to explore the effectiveness of direct instruction with playful extensions in developing emergent literacy in a kindergarten classroom. The intent of the project was to connect developmentally appropriate practices with direct instruction teaching. The systematic approach of Peer Assisted Learning Strategies (PALS) was followed using only the teacher directed lessons; playful extensions of the PALS lessons were integrated throughout to maintain the children's interest and to provide motivation for learning. Results indicated that the students who initially were the lowest performers in letter-sound correspondence and writing performance made the greatest gains in identifying letters-sounds and in applying letter-sound knowledge to making spelling approximations in writing. Kindergarten students with the highest academic abilities made the greatest gains in sight word recognition.*

## "A Spoonful of Direct Instruction"

Let us offer you a glimpse into the first days of kindergarten where excitement and curiosity abound, sprinkled with a touch of anxiousness. This mix of emotions encompasses the entire classroom and in this new learning environment, the scene is set to observe the students' literacy behaviors. The children have just settled themselves into their various learning centers—art, phonemic awareness activities, alphabet games, puzzles, reading, computers, and writing--creating windows through which to view the types and quality of literary experiences they have encountered prior to this eventful day. Follow us!

Beginning at the Reading Center, we will quietly observe Sam and Erica (pseudonyms used throughout the paper) as they become immersed in the world of books. Take note of the casual book behaviors exhibited by these two youngsters. Sam holds his book confidently, pointing to the words in the story and following the sentences from left to right. The smile on his face, coupled with his obvious sense of satisfaction as he turns each page of his self-selected book, clearly demonstrates his previous experiences and enjoyment with literature. Erica is sitting next to Sam. Unlike Sam, she is holding her book upside down and turning the pages backwards. While Erica is apparently content with her book, it is evident that her literacy experiences have been limited compared to Sam's, which in all likelihood total thousands of hours.

In the Writing Center, Mary, Morgan, and Carl are drawing pictures and attempting to write about their new artistic creations. Having been encouraged to include something special about herself, Mary has drawn a picture of her home, and she has written the letter "M" for Mary and "hm" for home. As evidenced in her writing, Mary is making connections between letters and sounds although at this stage she is typically leaving out letters that represent vowel-sounds. Meanwhile, Morgan has illustrated a picture of her cat and is in the process of applying her letter-sound knowledge to make spelling approximations to write the word "cat." From her actions, we can surmise that she is developing knowledge of the alphabetic principle and an understanding of the need and purpose of print. Next to Morgan sits Carl. He has

scribbled a picture and is now telling Mary that he drew his mom. Mary encourages him to write some letters; however, he continues to scribble. From these informal observations, it is discernable that Sam, Erica, Mary, Morgan, and Carl have started school with varying levels of emergent literacy skills. Sam, Mary, and Morgan's richer background experiences have better prepared them for further literacy instruction. In contrast, Erica and Carl may need more focused direct instruction in print awareness before moving forward as developing readers and writers. When we are sensitive to our students' literacy needs we will be aware that all children bring with them, on the very first day of school, varying degrees of emergent literacy development. It is then our job as teachers to implement activities and teacher-led lessons that are aligned with specific instructional goals, thereby scaffolding each student's knowledge and abilities in reading and writing.

## Review of Related Literature

Research findings indicate that the amount of time children spend engaged in reading and writing activities prior to formal instruction influences their emergent literacy development (Adams, 1990; Hall, 1987; Teale & Sulzby, 1986). These literacy experiences form the foundation upon which teachers can scaffold students' reading and writing abilities (Vygotsky, 1962). As witnessed in the foregoing vignette, students bring to school with them varied levels of literacy strengths. An observant teacher can gain insight into each child's emergent literacy abilities by gathering informal and formal assessments and immediately using the results to plan appropriate reading instruction. These early assessments assist teachers in planning lessons aligned with students' academic needs. Moreover, it is essential that early reading instruction assists children in developing the skills shown to predict reading success, specifically; the ability to rapidly identify the letters of the alphabet, knowledge of letter-sound association, and phonemic awareness (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1999; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). Following this, kindergarten students require an engaging and challenging literacy curriculum aligned with meaningful reading and writing experiences (National Association for the Education of Young

Children [NAEYC, 1998]).

Consequently, it is crucial that teachers determine the most effective way of implementing instruction. Research in the area of emergent literacy has influenced the way reading and writing are taught in today's elementary schools (Sulzby & Teale, 1991). It was once believed that children had to reach a "readiness level" in order to understand concepts related to reading; this was usually held to be approximately the age of seven. Countering this, findings indicate that mental age does not constrain what children learn, but rather determines the ways in which they can effectively be taught (Yopp & Singer, 1985).

Clearly, the appropriate level of instruction matched with the children receiving the instruction (Torgesen, 1998) will help to ensure that optimal literacy learning will take place for each student. With this knowledge in hand, it is advantageous to examine Developmentally Appropriate Practices (DAP) and direct instruction teaching methods. Connecting the practices of each may be beneficial in creating an effective literacy program for kindergarten students.

*Developmentally Appropriate Practices*

When considering literacy programs, teachers who endorse developmentally appropriate practices seek curricula that allow children to be activity engaged in constructive learning. Strategies that provide children with ample opportunities to construct their own knowledge through active participation in learning enhance cognitive development (Piaget, 1974). Using these strategies, the teacher guides the students through areas that cause confusion or difficulty by scaffolding learning to higher levels (Vygotsky, 1978). Classroom teachers who support this assertion create learning environments that provide opportunities for children to engage in a multitude of hands-on learning experiences; as a result, these children are purposely and meaningfully engaged in learning. From a Vygotskian perspective, the guided interaction is used to encourage individuals to move to their next stage of development; scaffolding can be gradually reduced as students practice and apply what

they have learned (Dixon-Krauss, 1996).

This approach supports the principles set forth by the NAEYC, stating that instructional strategies need to include "goals and expectations for young children's achievement in reading and writing that are developmentally appropriate" (1998, p. 1). Developmentally Appropriate Practices are based on the beliefs that children are active learners, drawing on social and physical experiences to construct knowledge (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). For example, phonemic awareness skills (hearing, identifying, and manipulating sounds in words) have been shown to increase through developmentally appropriate strategies based around play (Regush, Anderson, & Lee, 2002). Moreover, using manipulative materials to engage children in high-level play is recognized as an instructional strategy that effectively develops language and cognitive skills necessary for literacy acquisition (Christensen & Kelly, 2003). Once again, these practices make learning meaningful and purposeful for children thereby establishing effective reading instruction (Rayner, Perfetti, Pesetsky, & Seidenberg, 2001, p. 57).

*Direct Instruction*

In contrast to the above beliefs, researchers advocate that children who are behind in reading and writing need immediate, direct, explicit instruction in the alphabetic principle (symbols representing sounds) as well as immersion in print awareness activities (Adams, 1990; Liberman, Shankweiler, & Liberman, 1989; Torgesen, 1998). That is, children who begin school showing low performance in language skills benefit more from direct teaching approaches than children who are high performers (Xue & Meis, 2004). In Direct Instruction, children are divided into small ability groups. Each group is then engaged in approximately 15-20 minutes of intense, fast paced instruction with a strong emphasis on verbal responses. Across all academic areas students have shown success when their teachers used a direct, systematic approach that taught specific strategies for academic problem solving and schemata development (Carnine, Silbert, & Kameenui, 1997).

In summary, evaluating emergent literacy research, DAP, and direct instruction methods assists teachers in designing effective literacy programs. It is critical to recognize that "Children who get off to a poor start in reading rarely catch up" (Torgesen, 1998, p. 1). Bridging the gap between young students' literacy abilities while meeting their instructional and developmental needs becomes a formidable task for even the most experienced teacher.

## Methodology

"A Spoonful of Direct Instruction," an action research project was conducted in a classroom during spring semester of the students' kindergarten year; 15 of 20 children in the classroom participated. During the fall term, students had ample opportunities to participate in a variety of literacy activities, including literacy centers, shared reading, alphabet songs (including letter-sound associations), teacher read alouds, and creative writing activities.

Action research enables the classroom teacher to purposefully and systematically contemplate new teaching practices (Arhar, Holly & Kasten, 2001) using five phases of inquiry. The first phase is to identify a problem or an area for investigation. The goal of this action research project, "A Spoonful of Direct Instruction", is to connect developmentally appropriate practices with direct instruction teaching. The question addressed is: Does direct instruction teaching in letter-sound associations, blending sounds, and segmenting sounds in words, followed by playful extensions assists students in identifying letter sounds, developing a sight vocabulary, and in increasing the number of correct spelling approximations in writing?

The remaining four phases of this action research are as follows: collecting data, interpreting the data, implementing a plan, and last, analyzing the results. This process allows the teacher to become a reflective practitioner with the intent of improving instructional techniques.

*Materials*

For the purpose of this action research, we followed the systematic approach of the Peer Assisted Learning Strategies for First-Grade Readers (PALS) (Mathes, Grek, Howard, Allen, & Babyak, 1999) using only the teacher directed lessons. The PALS strategies provide letter-sound correspondence efficiently, using the students' and teacher's time effectively to maximize learning (Mathes, Howard, Allen, & Fuchs, 1998). The First-Grade PALS Program was used in this action research study because it specifically addressed the instructional needs of the kindergarten students and employed a direct instruction strategy to teach specific literacy skills. Playful extensions of the lessons were integrated throughout the study to maintain the children's interest and to provide motivation for learning. The playful extensions included the following activities: an alphabet manipulative game, dry erase marker boards, overhead alphabet tiles, and blackboard blending games. Big Books, language experience charts, and independent reading were also used to enhance the direct instruction lessons.

*Participants*

The elementary school chosen for the study is located in an affluent neighborhood drawing students from upper-income homes as well as from middle-and low-income families in the surrounding area. The school has approximately 793 students enrolled from pre-kindergarten to grade 5. Ethnic make-up of the school is 78% White, 15% Black, 1% Hispanic, 3.5% Asian, and 2.5% Other. Roughly 50 students in the school receive free lunch and 15 students receive reduced-priced lunch.

The inclusion kindergarten classroom had 20 students enrolled, 13 regular education students, seven Exceptional Education Students (ESE), a regular education teacher, an ESE teacher, and a part-time instructional aide. Five of these lowest performing ESE students were involved in daily direct instruction reading lessons conducted by the ESE teacher. Therefore, in order to allow these ESE students time to participate with the regular education students at literacy centers, they were not included in this action research. Thus, this sample included regular education

students (n=13) and Exceptional Student Education (ESE) students (n=2).

*Procedure*

*Data Collection*

The second phase of the action research plan consisted of collecting data. Students were assessed in their skills of alphabet recognition, letter-sound associations, sight word recognition, and specific stages of writing development. One-on-one assessments were conducted: each letter was presented in isolation and the student was asked to identify it and produce a corresponding sound. Next, sight words on the district kindergarten word list (15 words) were presented to the student on flash cards and credit was given for each word the student identified in two seconds or less. If a student mastered the kindergarten sight word list, the Dolch word list was then used. Assessment was discontinued after 5 words were missed. Writing samples were evaluated according to the Five Stages of Writing Development (Gentry, 1982) to determine the specific stage of writing for each student.

*Data Interpretation*

Pre-test results for the students participating in this project are as follows: the alphabet recognition assessments indicated that 14 of the 15 students had successfully identified 26 upper-and lower-case letters and one student identified 23 upper-and lower-case letters. Each student had knowledge of at least 16 letter sounds, with 9 students having mastered 26 sounds. Students were at varying stages in writing development; 12 attempted to use letter-sound associations to make spelling approximations in writing, and 3 students were using random letters at the pre-communicative stage of writing. The academic levels of the 15 students indicated that they were ready to receive further instruction in applying letter-sound associations to reading and writing tasks. They all required additional practice in blending sounds to form words. These skills are directly taught and practiced in the teacher directed lessons of the First-Grade PALS Program (Mathes et al., 1999). Three groups,

containing five students each, were formed according to ability. The high, average and low performing groups will be referred to as groups A, B, and C, respectively (see Table 1 and Fiqure 1).

**Table 1.** Measures of Participants' Alphabet Recognition, Alphabet Sounds, Sight Word Recognition and Stages of Writing Prior to Direct Instruction and Skill Extensions.

| | Students | Alphabet Recognition (# of letters) | Letter-Sounds (# of sounds) | Sight Words (# of sight words) | Stage of Writing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Group A | 3 Howard | 26 | 26 | 28 | 3.0 |
| | 4 Mary | 26 | 26 | 40 | 3.5 |
| | 8 Jen | 26 | 26 | 29 | 3.0 |
| | 10 Sam | 26 | 26 | 36 | 3.5 |
| | 11 Morgan | 26 | 26 | 25 | 3.0 |
| | **Mean** | **26** | **26** | **31.6** | **3.2** |
| Group B | 2 Isabelle | 26 | 23 | 14 | 2.5 |
| | 12 Lynn | 26 | 26 | 6 | 2.5 |
| | 13 Scott | 26 | 26 | 18 | 2.5 |
| | 14 Peter | 26 | 26 | 23 | 2.5 |
| | 20 Stephanie | 26 | 26 | 13 | 3.5 |
| | **Mean** | **26** | **25.4** | **14.8** | **2.7** |
| Group C | 5 Carl | 23 | 16 | 2 | 1.5 |
| | 7 Matthew | 26 | 19 | 0 | 1.0 |
| | 9 Erica | 26 | 25 | 0 | 1.0 |
| | 16 Ben | 26 | 21 | 0 | 1.0 |
| | 18 Kelsey | 26 | 24 | 3 | 2.0 |
| | **Mean** | **25.4** | **21** | **1** | **1.3** |
| **Pre-Instruction Means** | | **25.8** | **24.1** | **15.8** | **2.4** |

**Figure 1.** Five Stages of Writing Development by Richard Gentry (1982), "An analysis of developmental spelling in GNYS AT WRK."

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | Precommunicative | The child represents words by using symbols of the alphabet. |
| 2 | Semiphonetic | The child's first approximations in representing letter-sound correspondence. |
| 3 | Phonetic | The child represents the entire sound structure of the word being spelled. |
| 4 | Transitional | The child moves from relying on sounds to represent words to relying more on visual representation. |
| 5 | Correct | Child uses conventional spelling for familiar words and further explores letter sound associations. |

*Plan Implementation*

Teacher-directed lessons were conducted for groups A, B, and C three times a week for 15 to 20 minutes per lesson between January and March of the second semester for 12 weeks of the school year. These direct instruction lessons were initiated along with extension activities that incorporated the use of manipulative materials. The addition of hands-on activities encouraged student participation and served as motivational tools for learning. The five activities presented during the lessons were as follows: (1) Letter-Sound Practice, (2) Phonological Segmentation and Blending, (3) More Letter-Sound Practice, (4) Sounding Out, and (5) Reading Words Fast. In order to keep the students on task to complete lessons, the pace of the activities moved along rapidly. The playful extensions "hands-on activities" for the reinforcement of target skills followed each lesson. As mentioned earlier, the extensions included the following activities: an alphabet manipulative game, dry erase marker boards, overhead alphabet tiles,

and blackboard blending games. Big Books, language experience charts, and independent reading were also used to enhance the direct instruction lessons. These activities are described below.

The alphabet manipulative game included small plastic objects such as a pig, bat, cat, a magnetic board, and magnetic letters. The children chose an object, stated the name, segmented the sounds, selected the corresponding letters and spelled the word by placing the letters on the magnetic board. Primarily, the objects represented words that are spelled with three phonemes and follow the CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) spelling pattern. The children were praised for any letter-sound association they correctly represented and for all attempts made to spell words. For example, Jen selected the pig, said the /p/ sound, and placed the letter "p" on her magnetic board. The teacher encouraged her to continue by stating, "Fantastic! Jen, you heard the /p/ sound and found the letter "p." Playfulness was maintained during the lessons as the children shared the objects, helped each other with letter-sound associations, and continued to work together selecting magnetic letters to spell words. The children's enjoyment and interest in the lessons were observed as they took great pride in finding the correct letters and blending the sounds to read the words.

Dry erase marker boards were used by the children to practice segmenting and blending sounds to spell words and to illustrate corresponding pictures. They were encouraged to add detail, to develop a story line associated with their drawings, and to extend the activity by writing a story in their journals; with teacher assistance, they prepared their stories for publication.

Big Books containing verses with repetition and rhyme were used to engage the children in choral reading. The books reinforced the sounds introduced in the direct instruction lessons and the children practiced these sounds while reading aloud together. The stories were engaging; the children enjoyed the rhythm of language and frequently requested to re-read a Big Book. Language experience charts were used for blending sounds to make words, expanding language skills, and teaching story sequence. Additionally, the teacher provided books in

each student's independent reading range in order to scaffold sight word development. Blackboard blending games provided practice in segmenting and blending sounds to make words. These extensions were created for a playful, engaging environment allowing the students to practice the skills taught in the direct instruction lessons, to interact with each other, to share knowledge, and to create meaningful learning experiences.

## Results

In the final phase of the action research, we analyzed the results and reflected on the implications for future instruction. Although the three groups had varying responses to the direct instruction lessons, each group showed growth during the three months of instruction. Groups A and B made greater gains in the development of sight words than group C. After examining the results of groups A and B, it was difficult to ascertain if the moderate growth achieved in writing, as well as sight word development, was due to standard classroom practices or an outcome of the direct instruction lessons. Group C, however, showed the greatest growth in both identifying letter sounds and in increasing the number of correct spelling approximations in writing (see Table 2).

Group A, composed of students with the highest academic skills, was initially enthusiastic about the direct instruction activities as evidenced by their active participation in each lesson. However, after several weeks, it became apparent that the group had tired quickly of this method. Lack of interest in the direct instruction lessons began as demonstrated by off-task behaviors of Group A. For example, Mary had a sight vocabulary of at least 40 words in January. She was usually on-task and productive when working during center and circle time. However, during direct instruction group lesson, off-task behaviors, such as fidgeting with hair or shoelaces, indicated a detachment from the lessons. After several lessons, obvious inattentiveness continued. Informal assessments indicated that Mary had mastered the skills presented in the lessons. Therefore, she was given the opportunity to read independently when the remainder of the group received direct instruction. During the next few months, Mary's sight vocabulary

increased to about 200 words. For the remainder of the students in the group, the pace of the lesson was accelerated in order to hold the groups' attention and to allow a greater length of time for independent reading. When given time to explore new books, the students in this group actively engaged in learning to decode as they attempted to sound out words. Occasionally, Mary showed an eagerness to rejoin the group, yet her interactions with the other students indicated that this was more likely for social reasons than for academic needs.

Group B exhibited a similar reaction to direct instruction as Group A. Student enthusiasm at the onset of the program for this group was brief. As in Group A, it was necessary to maintain a fast pace to keep the group focused. Stephanie, observed to be a very active member of the group displayed an obvious displeasure with the lessons. Despite a sight vocabulary of only 13 words when this project began, recall of her sight words steadily grew as the lessons progressed. When called to the group, Stephanie would exclaim, "Not this again!" We concluded that the lessons were not addressing specific academic needs for this student. She was excused from the group's direct instruction lessons, as Mary was in group A, and encouraged to read independently. Lessons continued as prescribed for Group B. When the students appeared restless, activities were changed to redirect their attention. This happened frequently as the students were mastering the skills. They experienced success as they used their decoding skills to sound out words. It was evident from their oral reading that they were building sight vocabularies along with phonetic skills. Sensitivity to students' academic and social needs continued to be the priority in guiding the students' literacy development during these lessons.

Group C engaged in the direct instruction lessons and the hands-on activities more readily than groups A or B. Motivation to participate in these activities increased over time for this group. This was informally observed as the students' eagerness to participate in the activities became more apparent as they displayed confidence in their abilities (by applying letter-sound knowledge to decoding words and spelling), worked cooperatively with group members, and remained on-task during each lesson.

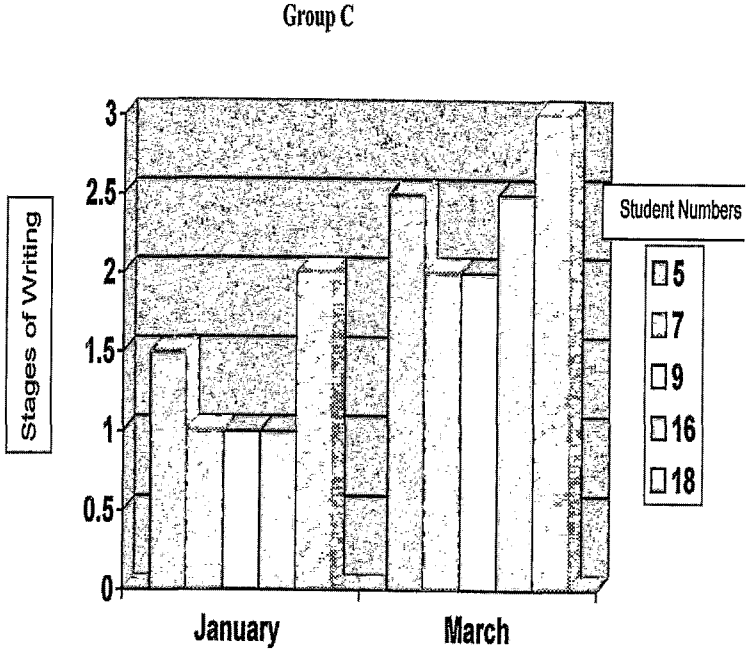
**Table 2.** Measures of Participants' Alphabet Recognition, Alphabet Sounds, Sight Word Recognition, and Stages of Writing Following Direct Instruction and Skill Extensions.

March Assessments

| | Student # and Name | Alphabet Recognition (# of letters) | Letter-Sounds (# of sounds) | Sight Words (# of sight words) | Stage of Writing |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Group A** | 3 Howard | 26 | 26 | 37 | 3.5 |
| | 4 Mary | 26 | 26 | 200 | 4.0 |
| | 8 Jen | 26 | 26 | 45 | 3.5 |
| | 10 Sam | 26 | 26 | 100 | 4.0 |
| | 11 Morgan | 26 | 26 | 40 | 3.5 |
| | **Mean** | **26** | **26** | **84.4** | **3.7** |
| **Group B** | 2 Isabelle | 26 | 26 | 22 | 3.0 |
| | 12 Lynn | 26 | 26 | 20 | 3.0 |
| | 13 Scott | 26 | 26 | 24 | 3.0 |
| | 14 Peter | 26 | 26 | 28 | 3.0 |
| | 20 Stephanie | 26 | 26 | 40 | 4.0 |
| | **Mean** | **26** | **26** | **26.8** | **3.2** |
| **Group C** | 5 Carl | 24 | 22 | 10 | 2.5 |
| | 7 Matthew | 26 | 26 | 9 | 2.0 |
| | 9 Erica | 26 | 26 | 1 | 2.0 |
| | 16 Ben | 26 | 24 | 2 | 2.5 |
| | 18 Kelsey | 26 | 26 | 9 | 3.0 |
| | **Mean** | **25.6** | **24.8** | **6.2** | **2.4** |
| **Post-Instruction Means** | | **25.8** | **25.9** | **39.1** | **3.1** |

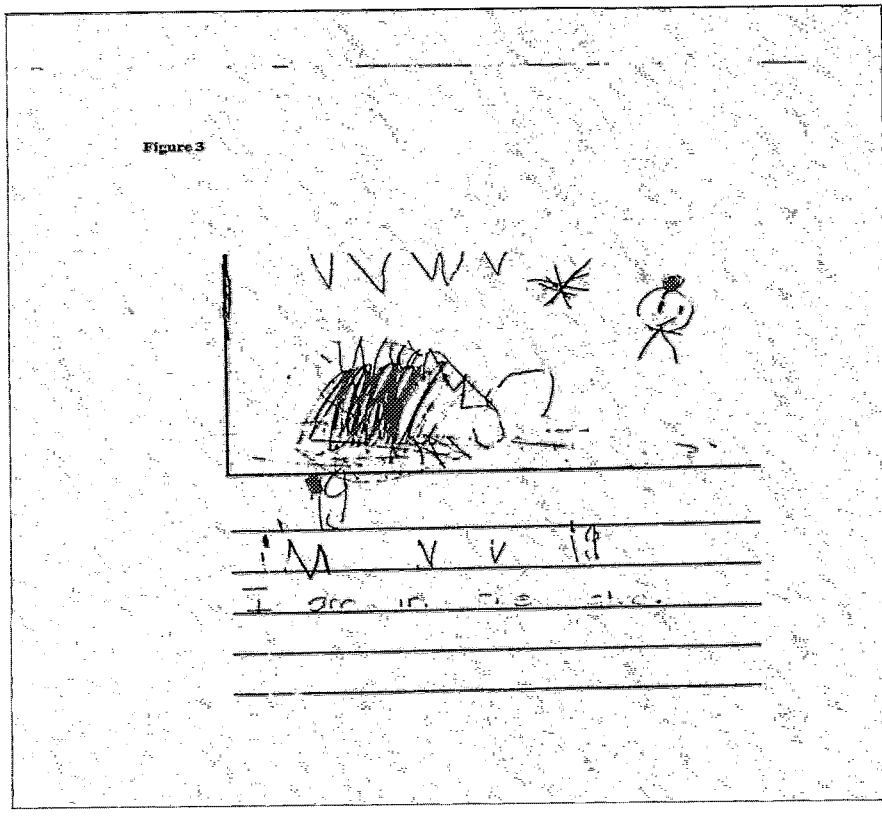
The instructional levels of the First-Grade PALS direct teaching lessons addressed the academic needs of the students in Group C more directly than those of the students in groups A and B. At the onset of these lessons, the students in Group C had little knowledge of blending sounds to make words. When comparing growth over time of Groups A, B, and C, Group C showed the greatest gains in letter-sound associations and writing. Each student in Group C advanced at least one step in the stages of writing (see Figure 2).

Figure 2




For example, when observing Matthew and Ben in the writing group, it was evident that they had successfully attempted to write about their illustrations. Although Matthew completed only one sentence when describing his picture, his use of letter-sound associations became more consistent. When evaluating his writing, we noted that Matthew's abilities had advanced considerably (see Figure 3). Prior to this study,

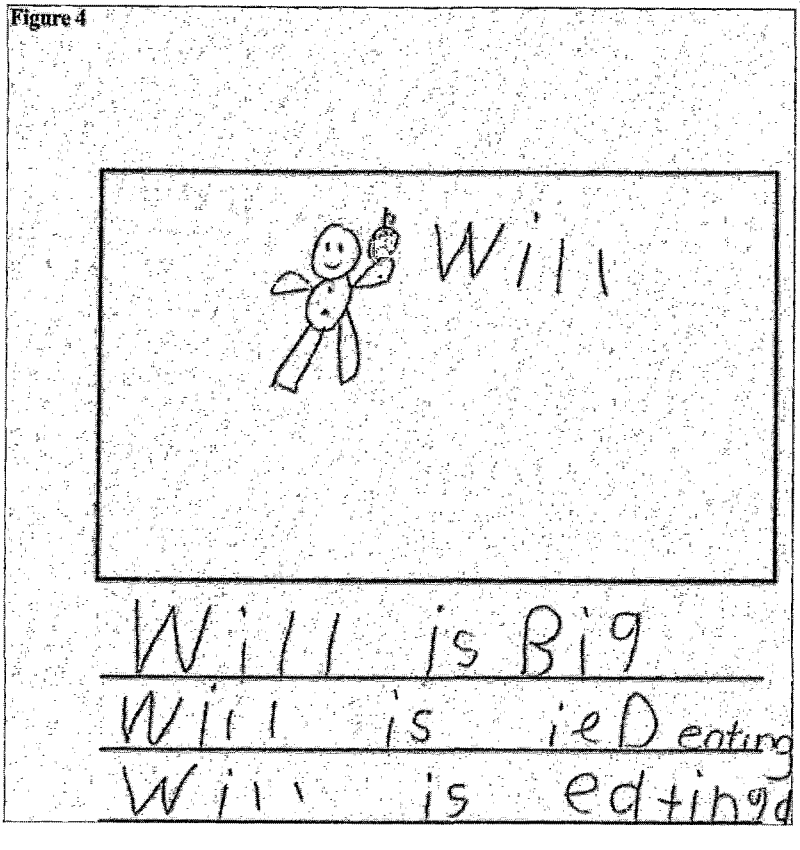
Matthew was writing at the pre-communicative stage, representing words by using symbols of the alphabet. By the completion of direct instruction and extended skill activities, his writing samples indicated that he was using some letter-sound associations; however, he was not representing the entire sound structure of words. To reinforce his correct approximations, the teacher then modeled the correct spellings of the words (see Figure 3).




On a slightly higher level, Ben's writing indicated that he was moving from the semi-phonetic stage to the phonetic stage, representing the entire sound structure of words. His letter-sound knowledge enabled him to blend sounds to write two and three phoneme words. He attempted to use letter-sound association to make spelling

approximations (as shown in his spelling of the word "eating") although he lacked knowledge of the various graphemes that correspond to the long /e/ sound (see Figure 4). The teacher then modeled the correct spelling scaffolding Ben's spelling ability. Additionally, as seen in the writing of his friend's name, Will, he was developing a sight word vocabulary (see Figure 4).

Figure 4




Overall, the First-Grade PALS Program with the addition of playful extensions was an effective teaching method for the children in Group C. The instructional level met their academic needs, thereby engaging them in group lessons and activities.

## Discussion

A "spoonful" of direct instruction, if "sweetened" with just the right amount of complimentary, playful, extended lessons, can be beneficial in early literacy development. The goal of this action research project, "A Spoonful of Direct Instruction," is to connect developmentally appropriate practices with direct instruction teaching. The question addressed is: Does direct instruction teaching in letter-sound associations, blending sounds, and segmenting sounds in words, followed by playful extensions assists students in identifying letter sounds, developing a sight vocabulary, and in increasing the number of correct spelling approximations in writing? We advocate that the kindergarten children who participated in this study did demonstrate an increase in reading and/or writing. Groups A and B made greater gains in sight vocabulary, while Group C showed the greatest growth in identifying letter sounds and in increasing the number of correct spelling approximations in writing. While we cannot say that the growth was entirely due to the direct instruction lessons and playful extensions; we can say that there appeared to be a direct correlation between the skills taught as part of the PALS program and practiced by the "hand-on activities", and the children's application of those skills in classroom literacy activities.

Effective lessons should be taught in an active and challenging manner that create an atmosphere where children are able to engage in meaningful learning. Successful teaching is contingent on lesson designs that meet each child in his/her "zone of proximal development" (ZPD). The ZPD is the range between the students' independent working level and dependent level wheres he needs support from an adult or capable peer (Vygotsky, 1978). This is crucial in scaffolding learning, providing motivation for engagement in activities, and creating meaningful experiences for all students. The PALS lessons scaffolded the children's learning by teaching them specific skills. When the children moved into the independent level of their ZPDs, their attention to the lessons waned; therefore, the lessons were either adjusted to match their new level of knowledge within their ZPDs or the children were allowed to move from the group. The children who moved from the group used the skills

learned in the direct instruction lessons to self-scaffold, thus continuing the effectiveness of the literacy instruction. For example, Mary and Stephanie moved from their groups and read independently; they chose books that were pre-selected by the teacher to meet students' independent reading levels. This proved to be productive time spent reading as shown by their growth in sight word vocabulary. Sam was very confident in his reading ability as observed during the first days of school. The January assessment indicated that he had a sight word vocabulary of 36 words similar to Mary's 40 words. Perhaps if Sam had been excused and encouraged to read independently as Mary and Stephanie had been, we would have seen a greater increase in his sight word vocabulary. Although this is just speculation concerning Sam's reading growth, as other factors may have contributed to Mary and Stephanie's reading progress, such as reading outside the school day. Erica, who was observed during the first days of school holding her book upside down, benefited from the continued scaffolding of the teacher-led direct instruction lessons. Initial assessments indicated that she was writing at the precommunicative stage using symbols of the alphabet but not connecting letter-sound associations. The March assessments revealed that she was using letter-sound correspondence as she moved to the semiphonetic stage of writing.

Meeting the children's specific literacy skills needs was successful using a direct instruction approach. However, the children were working within their individual ZPDs using self-scaffolding and other mediators such as the puzzles, magnetic letters, dry erase boards, and creative writing to practice the skills learned. Thus, a learning environment was created that successfully connected direct instruction with developmentally appropriate practices.

## Implication for Teachers and Teacher Educators

Effective classroom teachers need a variety of instructional methods to meet the diverse needs of their students. It is imperative that teachers utilize formal and informal assessments at the beginning of the school year and use data obtained to immediately plan appropriate literacy instruction. Most reading/language arts programs in schools

today provide a variety of assessment tools that are readily available for use. Many teachers implement more naturalistic assessments, such as observations conducted while children are in centers or working with small groups of children in a variety of activities. It is clear that assessment needs to drive instruction in order to provide quality literacy activities for all children.

An additional implication of the study is the need for varied classroom instruction. Because no two children learn exactly the same way, meeting the needs of all children in today's classroom can be daunting. This study attempted to illustrate a classroom that involved centers, small group direct instruction, independent learning, and creative and critical thinking extension activities. As demonstrated in the study, children need a variety of learning designs—one size does not fit all—to maintain their motivation and attention.

In summary, implementing literacy programs aligned with meaningful reading and writing experiences, providing opportunities for children to engage in a multitude of "hands-on" literacy activities, and incorporating lessons that scaffold each student's knowledge and abilities in reading and writing will help to establish challenging and supportive literacy programs. Thus creating classrooms that are reflections of "joyful" learning environments that stimulate the continued development of literacy.

## References

Adams, M. J. (1990). *Beginning to read: Thinking and learning about print.* Cambridge, MA: Institute of Technology Press.

Arhar, J. M., Holly, M. L., & Kasten, W. C. (2001). *Action research for teachers.* Columbus, Ohio: Prentice-Hall.

Bredekamp, S., & Copple, C. (1997 eds.). *Developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs.* Rev. ed. Washington, DC: NAEYC.

Carnine, D., Silbert, J., & Kameenui, E. J. (1997). *Direct instruction reading* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall.

Christensen, A. & Kelly, K. (2003). No time for play: Throwing the baby out with the bath water. *The Reading Teacher*, 56, 528-30.

Dixon-Krauss, L. (1996). *Vygotsky in the classroom: Mediated literacy instruction and assessment.* White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers.

Ehri, L. (1999). Graphophonemic awareness: Development in elementary students. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 3*(1), 1-30.

Gentry, J. R. (1982) An Analysis of Developmental Spelling in GYNS AT WRK. *The Reading Teacher,* 36, 192-200.

Hall, N., May, E., Moores, J., Shearer, J., & Williams, S. (1987). The literate home-corner. In P.K. Smith (Ed.), *Parents and teachers together* (pp. 134 –144). London: Macmillian.

International Reading Association (IRA) and National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) (1998). Learning to read and write: developmentally appropriate practices for young children—A joint position statement of the IRA and NAEYC, DC.

Liberman, I., Shankweiler, D., & Liberman, A. (1989). The alphabetic principle and learning to read. In D. Shankweiler and I. Liberman (Eds.). *International Academy for Research in Learning Disabilities* (pp. 1-33). Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

Mathes, P. G., Grek, M. L., Howard, J. K., Allen, S. H., & Babyak, A. (1999). Peer-assisted learning strategies for first-grade readers: A tool for preventing early reading failure. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice,* 14(1), 50-60.

Mathes, P. G., Howard J. K., Allen, S. H., & Fuchs, D. (1998). Peer - assisted learning strategies for First-Grade Readers: Responding to the needs of diverse learners: *Reading Research Quarterly*, 33(1), 62-94.

Piaget, J. (1974). The future of developmental child psychology. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 3(2), 87-94.

Rayner, K., Foorman, B. R., Perfetti, C. A., Pesetsky, D., & Seidenberg, M.S. (2001). How psychological science informs the teaching of reading. *Psychological Science in the public Interest*, 2, 31-74.

Regush, N., Anderson, J., & Lee, E. (2002). Using play as a context for children's acquisition of phonemic awareness. *Yearbook of the College Reading Association* , 234-46.

Snow, C. E., Burns, M. S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children.* Washington, D.C.: National Academy Press.

Sulzby, E., & Teale, W. H. (1991). Emergent literacy. In R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, and P. D. Pearson (Eds.), *Handbook of Reading Research* (vol. 2) (pp.727-757). New York: Longman

Teale, W. H., & Sulzby, E. (1986). *Emergent literacy: Writing and reading.* Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Torgesen, J. K. (Spring/Summer, 1998). Catch them before they fall: Identification and assessment to prevent reading failure in young children. *American Educator,* 32-39.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1962). *Thought and language.* Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Xue,Y., & Meisels, S. (2004). *Early literacy instruction and learning in kindergarten: Evidence from the early childhood longitudinal study- -kindergarten class of 1998-1999, 44*(1), 191-229.

Yopp, H. K., & Singer, H. (1985). Toward an interactive reading instructional model: Explanation of activation of linguistic awareness and meta-linguistic ability in learning to read. In H. Singer and R. B. Ruddell (Eds.), *Theoretical models and processes of reading* (pp. 135-143), Newark, ED: International Reading Association.

***Jean M. Keaton is a kindergarten teacher with Leon County Schools in Tallahassee, Florida. Barbara C. Palmer, Karen R. Nicholas, and Vickie E. Lake are faculty members at the Florida State University, Tallahassee, Florida.***